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Aftershow: Four Letters

Berlin, November 2011

Dear Sharon,

Our ongoing discussion of the term "reenactment" first came up when you asked us to join you for an event around "chronopolitics" last October.[1] We talked about your ambivalence towards using the term when it comes to the understanding of your work. We won't veto: there are quite a few examples of conservative reenactments. Some seem to suggest that there is a stable past, bygone, enclosed, which can be entered and seamlessly transported into the present time. Some serve to stabilize nationalism and to secure Western/white hegemony. We recall that you mentioned members of the right-wing Tea Party in the US that perform in historical costumes. It also made us think of the Karl May reenactments that the author Katrin Sieg brings up in her book *Ethnic Drag*. Every year since the 1950s in the small city of Bad Segeberg, white Germans perform the famous fiction about a friendship between the narrator, Old Shatterhand, and Winnetou, chief of the tribe of the Mescalero Apaches. By undertaking this reenactment, as Sieg argues, they try to cathartically purge the postwar time from the brutal persecution of difference in National Socialism. She sees these performances as an effort to deal with the ambivalent feelings of "the traumatic experience of shame" on the one hand, and the "denial of collective responsibility" on the other hand.[2]

We talked about the fact that both our practices, in contrast, engage with the past by juggling multiple temporalities at the same time. We work with performances that only momentarily hold time gaps together, without pretending to go back into the past or to represent a certain historical character. When you talked about your older piece *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA)*,[3] where you re-speak the text of Patty Hearst's audiotapes by heart, make mistakes, and ask the audience to deliver corrections,

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you said that it becomes impossible "to access the past moment as any kind of projected wholeness." While you are visibly insecure about the text and the audience corrects you, some shy, some very, or even too, engaged, your re-speaking produces a transmission "which is halted, fragmented and distorted."[3]

We are really interested in the term "anachronism" (a term that you often use in relationship to your work). The idea of anachronism, the deliberate bringing together of pieces from different periods, allows for breaks in the progression of time and in a seemingly natural temporal order. It also highlights—in an explicit and sometimes unruly way—temporality as an important issue of politics. This is how we understand what you say about "deploying anachronism as an active error, a willful mistake, a deliberate confusion of temporality." Could the method of anachronism also work to undermine what Johannes Fabian has coined "the refusal of coevalness" in his seminal book *Time and the Other*,[5] namely, the idea that Western societies see themselves in a time ahead of other societies, even though they talk about people living in the same period? Could it displace the West from this advanced position? What do you think?

In your work the engagement with time is often related to speech acts. You highlight that speech acts are collectively authored, even across time. You ask how a speech act might locate you in a certain position or identity. In our performance films we focus more on the temporal politics of embodiment, and, for that, we find Elizabeth Freeman's term "temporal drag" very useful.[6] It opens up a different understanding of "drag," not only as a subcultural practice to undermine or "mine" the two-gender system by wrongly citing gendered appearances, but also as a set of temporal practices. Drag, then, can be seen as a practice that works against subjecting too much to normative biographies and other hegemonic historical narratives. We especially like embodiments in which different times meet and where messy, transtemporal body-object-assemblages are produced: for instance, in our last project, *No Future/No Past* (2011), the performers are addressed as Joe Ramone, Poly Styrene, Darby Crash, and Alice Bags. Still, they don't play punks from the '70s, they act as the contemporary musicians, queer band members, which they are. At the same time they connect and form new embodiments with materials from the past such as photographs, speeches, and

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props from the '70s. But this does not mean that the performer who is addressed as Alice Bags wears—of all things—clothes, or uses props that refer to her historical character.

For us these trans-temporal embodiments would not work without what we like to call "desire." We see desire—without referring to ideas of "lack"—as something that allows for "touching across history" (Carolyn Dinshaw's term[7]), that instigates or cuts attachments. If we take *No Future/No Past* again, the performer seems to indicate that s_he is not trying to "be" the historical figure Alice Bags or Poly Styrene, but instead that s_he is trying to connect to photographs, objects, pieces of clothing, gestures, and poses. The performer seems to say: "See! This is me, Fruity Franky, not Poly Styrene. What you see is still not 'my' body. It is not my nature, it is not a personal feature. It is an assemblage of speech, bodies, props, and documents. I desire those documents; this connection gives me pleasure and I would strongly recommend that you, the audience, do the same." This visible connection, plus the lines of desire that are created between the body of the performer and bodies or objects from another time, is what we would call a performance practice of "drag."[8] This desire does not aim to understand the past. It does not attempt to appropriate, or integrate the findings into the present time. It just urges us to leave the here-and-now without knowing whether we will arrive at a safe or exciting place. It is necessarily messy, since different sentiments, as well as diverse practices of nostalgia, utopia, and critique, may mingle. Trans-temporal drag here is seeing the performer doing the laborious but pleasurable work of becoing the historical document (without ever being it).

Would desire be a term or a method that could connect to your work as well? It seems that this is what you suggest when you bring together citations from love letters and thoughts about activist work, for instance in your piece *I March in the Parade of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I Am Not Free* : "If you long for me, I long for you. / I'm waiting for the war to end. / Come out against war and oppression. / I love you. I love you entirely..."

With love (in times of war and oppression),
Renate and Pauline

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Berlin, July 2009

Dear Andrea,

It was a decisive move to (re)enter the art world through the door of Les Complices*, when we did our show "Sometimes you fight for the world, sometimes you fight for yourself" at your space in 2005. We hadn't participated in any art show for years, and Les Complices* was the perfect stage to make this experiment, even if—as you noticed—we had some crises while preparing this exhibition!

There were different reasons why the format of a "solo show" was a strange one for Renate and me at this point. Informed by activist work, our practice in the years before had been much more concerned with the search for different stages and different political audiences. We published, for instance, a book on labor and sexuality titled *Reproduktionskonten fälschen!* ("to falsify the accounts of reproduction")[9] and we—together with Brigitta Kuster—presented it in the format of a lecture performance at art spaces but also in the context of leftist/feminist structures and in academic settings. Renate comes from a theater background. She was very fond of performances of New Dance pieces by the Judson Dance Theater[10] and The Grand Union,[11] and she herself worked on pieces that included documentary elements as well as the material of everyday life. In the beginning of the '90s there was the huge outbreak of open racism in Germany and drastic changes to asylum laws.[12] At the same time, right-wing agitators were welcomed in many art institutions as a kind of fashionable breaking of taboo. For Renate, as for many people in her circle of friends, the only adequate response was to address political topics directly in the context of art, and she started working on exhibitions such as "trap," "Game Grrrl," and "NatureTM."[13] It was during this time that I got to know her. I was really interested in these projects because they tried to instigate debates across diverse social groups, but also intervened into the art world with a quite concrete critique. The idea was not to use the art space to produce activism but to change what could be conceived as art. I was pursuing similar questions at that time. My background was mostly in music, being part of the band Rhythm King and Her Friends, and

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playing quite consistently with this band in clubs for several years. With the band, I tried to invent a format that left space for experimenting with electronic music, but also with visual elements, with a nonhierarchical queer band structure, mixing political and poetic texts.

As you see, this is the point where our interests crossed: being performers and staging performances, addressing audiences, questioning authenticity and empowerment on stage, we had both been following our interest in performance for a long time. In parallel, at the end of the '90s in Berlin, we witnessed a particularly glamorous and interesting moment for (underground) drag performances, where a lot of flaming artists experimented with new queer, feminist, non-occidental, and outrageous ways of staging bodies (for instance the great performances of Salon Oriental in SO36). For us this opened up a very different approach, which we kept on developing further in our installations. We are not so interested in performances that aim at showing bodies unmediated, "anchored in the here and now," as was often the case in the 1970s tradition of performance. Instead we are attentive to drag performances that produce other kinds of bodies, which do not match dichotomies between "authentic" and "false" or "normal" and "other." Drag, of course, rejects the revelation of what is behind the stage or under the clothes. Rather, it refers to the productive connections of natural and artificial, animate and inanimate, to props, records, hair, legs, to all that which tends to produce connections to others, and other things, rather than to represent them. We are interested in costumes, wigs, makeup, songs, stagings of posed photographs and film scenes, because they take up expectations, evidence, stereotypes, and violent histories without facilitating their repetition.

This reminds me of an experience I had the first time I went to a queer bar in Bulgaria, during a trip to Plovdiv. In the early 2000s, I often visited my family, but I didn't know any other queers in Bulgaria. It was in the cellar of a modern communist building. At first glance, it looked very much like a common gay party, with a bar and some shows. There were some dancers in oriental drag, some performers lip-syncing to Balkan and Western pop music, most of them male-to-female transpeople or drag performers, but there were many masculine and butch

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women as well. But instead of a sexy atmosphere, where everybody catches glimpses of others or returns a look, people here kept their distance. There was almost no exchange of looks, as if everybody felt like a stranger in this place. It was as if everybody was present yet disidentifying from the party. I felt that this certainly had to do with a very hostile climate for queers, where most people live in the closet for safety reasons; in this context I understood that this party was a place of resistance. As an audience member, I felt addressed by the show, I was dancing and partying, I liked the music, but I certainly didn't get any acknowledgement from anybody that I belonged (nobody did). I had to unlearn how to be a queer in a queer bar, in the exact place where I was expecting to feel more connected (because I was in Bulgaria). I was really taken by this unruly feeling of un-belonging or at least of feeling "outside belonging," which would urge me, or the people in the bar, to reconsider our positions and identities. This is something that I try not to forget when we produce drag performances in our installations, trying to create new relations between the audience, the performers, filmed material, and other displayed elements. We have now shown several installations since 2005 at Les Complices*, always with the expectation that we can reflect or complicate the different positions assigned to an art space and its audience. In drag we found a partially friendly and partially aggressive method to produce some distance from those assignments.

In Les Complices*, and with the offer of your friendship, we really found a home base for our engagement with art.From the very beginning we loved your approach of taking political involvement seriously without forgetting about the formats and history of art practices, your insistence on the struggle with art history, with questions such as authorship, the relation between audience and art work, or the different gazes involved in encountering an exhibition. We are intrigued by your close relationship to artists, which means that you are participating in thinking through a process from the first idea on. Also, you do your own interventions into formats of art, by organizing very specific workshops and events, which are inclusive, giving people space,literally, letting them develop their own connections to Les Complices*.

Yours in deep affection,
Pauline

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New York, May 2014

Dear Ginger,

When does the performance end and when does it begin? Where is the limit between stage and backstage? We would like to share some further thoughts about these questions which we have been discussing a lot, and which we tried to address in the different performances we developed with you in *No Future/No Past*.

Isabelle Alfonsi just made some helpful comments on the notion of the backstage. She wrote: "Without any audience, beyond representation, the backstage—a witness to the transformation of musicians and actors from the city to the stage, and back again—is a space of freedom and resistance where the theater's fourth wall disappears and where the well-oiled mechanics of the show do not apply. The public comes to meet the artists, and the hierarchy implied by the show slowly dwindles. One can be eccentric with no goal, have no necessity to please the spectator. The backstage can thus be a place of an invention of one's self, an image of the margin as a chosen place for an artistic position."[14]

What happens when the performance takes place in this very margin? As you know, in No Future/No Past, we referenced Ronald Tavel's play *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1965), because we liked the fact that the performers were asked to repeat the lines given by an "onstage director," who is also visible in the film. As Tavel wrote, "There was no more intention to have the participants 'act' as acting normally is understood … Everything works for The Life of Juanita Castro. Including the unforeseen, the mistakes, the last minute or fortuitous error, and it is that, no more, no less."[15] When we decided not to rehearse the film before shooting it, we also wanted to be open to all the unexpected moments of a performance, and to keep it insecure and fragile. We liked that the repetition allowed for a line to be said twice, not only in different voice tones, with mistakes, but also with different accents and different degrees of seriousness or irony. It allowed for bad acting, or for not acting at all. It underlined the unrehearsed, or the process of rehearsing for a future performance.

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Unlike Tavel, we didn't want to appear as "onstage directors" ourselves, giving commands and lines to the actors, but preferred to hire the performer Werner Hirsch for this task. Ginger, when you re-speak his lines, something very particular happens, because you add seriousness and lightness to the performance at the same time, embodying the marvelous makeup and clothes of the punk muse and inspirer Jordan. You wear her outfit, but you are addressed by the name of Darby Crash, the gay singer of the band Germs, who committed suicide in 1980 at the age of twenty-two. Your quite specific style of speech produces a kind of "backstage-performance" that we immediately loved. The camera frame also supports this. We were interested in Andy Warhol's idea of shooting the scene not from the front but from the side, so that the performers look at an invisible camera (or audience) in front of them. This means that the performance happens for an audience that has been displaced (the camera made the audience move backstage as well!), and this produces the effect that you and the other performers often move outside of the frame and that the main parts of the performance remain invisible. It reminded us of the situation when one helps out at the concert of a friend's band from backstage. You must of course be very familiar with this situation, as you were on tour quite a lot with your band Men. Do you remember being neither onstage nor in the audience, but looking from the side, and having this particular position where you can see the per-formers as long as they are not moving to the front too much?

This "marginal" or heterotopic space might be the space that affirms difference, and, as Foucault described heterotopias, a space where we arrive at a sort of "absolute break ... with traditional time"[16]: "no future," as the punk movement uttered.

Yours in fond affection,
Pauline and Renate

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Berlin, August 2013

Dear Eran,

We are trying to take up your challenging questions about our recent engagement with masks and their relations to toxins and bodies. As you know, we started collecting images of masks when we were doing research for *Toxic* (2012). We looked at ethnographic masks but also at those made by leftist or environmental activists (we were particularly interested in masks that deal with toxins, and found quite extravagant ones!), and masks made by queer activists from the AIDS crisis, or Pride masks, which stage glamor and at the same time resistance to normalized embodiments. We looked at protesters in the streets, at the signs they produce, especially those connected to their bodies, not unlike your splendid sculptures in *Panorama* (2013), which gather props and objects from specific demonstrations, and which might be read as assemblages for past and future protests.

Since we were researching around toxicity, we also reread texts from the '70s German patients' movement, which understood sickness not as an individual problem, but as an effect of capitalism. It is quite a challenge to conceive one's own body, one's own pain and fears in that way,[17] don't you think? Consequently, they considered healthiness and ableism as bourgeois concepts. "Sickness is the only form of life in capitalism," they even claimed, and demanded to perform sickness in a collective way. Beatriz Preciado seems to take up those ideas of undermining the opposition between health/ableism and sickness in her more recent book *Testo Junkie*, where she develops a critique of the historical development of pharmaceutics and pornography as two mutually reinforcing, ordering principles of twenty-first-century life. In the book, she explores how these tools can be appropriated and used in unauthorized ways as exemplified by her own illegal consumption of testosterone. "When I take a dose of testosterone, what I'm actually giving myself is a chain of political signifiers that have been materialized in order to acquire the form of a molecule that can be absorbed by my body."[18] She then makes a claim, not for "gender change," but rather "gender piracy." These thoughts

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resonate with our ideas (as do our ongoing conversations with you and our mutual friend Eva Meyer about relations to the body, relations to pain, which very much sharpened our questions): How do toxic substances also develop pleasurable, enabling, surprising, and curative effects? How could technologies and media that also poison and hurt (and sometimes all at once) cure and empower?

If the body-toxin combination is an assemblage with an open future rather than a failure, the mask can be seen as part of this arrangement. What interests us is not just that people can hide behind these masks and protect their bodies against toxins, against toxic surveillance or repression, but exactly their double function of actively revealing and disguising at the same time. The masks are more or less opaque, in terms of not giving a view of the face, but also in terms of not being overtly clear about their purpose. We ended up producing a series of masks ourselves. Opacity, thus, is not just invisibility, but rather a certain kind of visibility, namely one that does not allow understanding. Speaking of masks, the veil came to our minds, and the way Eva Meyer describes it: "It prevents us from making a picture of ourselves according to some preset similarity, identity, or oppositional quality and exposes us to our irreducible strangeness."[19]

For us those thoughts about the veil, the mask, and opacity are bound to our frequent use of curtains in our exhibitions. You have also been using curtains for a long time in your work. Do you see a connection between the curtain and this notion of "irreducible strangeness"? In the catalog of your exhibition "Disorder of Appearance," the curtain is conferred a chronopolitical function, which interferes in the common experience of space and visualization. "It functions as an attention-grabbing strategy that by temporally concealing makes us all the more aware of the act of exposure, of rendering public."[20]

We also think of the impressive durational performances in your piece *FM Scenario*, which we saw at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) Berlin, where Kerstin Honeit, Karolin Meunier, Stefan Pente, and William Wheeler follow scripts and carry out tasks that they seem to be executing for a photographic camera, not for an audience. For hours they interact with props, clothes, masks, newspapers, plants, wigs, or architectural elements,

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tasks that take them a long time to fulfill and that ask for sincerity and dedication. The purpose of their acts has no evident explanation. Instead, they force the audience to become very active in reconnecting, recombining, and creating links of meaning, between the actions of the performers and the elements of the soundtrack. In some way, one could say that they are using an opaque style of performance. Would you agree? Maybe a performance of a silent and passive resistance, with meaningless acts and gestures: a refusal which leaves what it rejects undetermined.

With love,
Pauline and Renate

PS: After talking with you, we re-edited some parts of the film *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of their Desperation*. We wanted to highlight that the performance had been filmed in one continuous take. Therefore we barely used images of the second camera, but only edited in some extreme close-ups, highlighting the process of filming and editing as such. Your remark about this edit between the first part and the second part of the film, which should be shorter, in order to connect (instead of separate) the two parts, was extremely helpful. This works much better now!

Notes

1 At the New Museum in New York.

2 Kathrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 78.

3 Sharon Hayes, "Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA): Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29," 2003, shaze.info, "1974, Patty Hearst was kidnapped from her apartment in Berkeley, California by a radical political organization called the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). From February to April, 1974, the SLA and Patty Hearst made four audio tapes in which she addresses her parents on the subject of her kidnapping, the SLA's ransom (that the Hearst family feed all the poor people in California) and the family and the FBI's actions during the ordeal. In the last tape, Hearst renames herself Tania and announces that she is joining the SLA in their struggle. From June 2001 to January 2002, Sharon Hayes performed a re-speaking of each of the four audio tapes. In each instance, Hayes partially memorized the transcript of the audio tape and spoke the text in front of an audience to whom she gave a transcript of the text. She asked them to correct her when she was wrong and to feed her a line when she needed it."

4 Hayes, "Temporal Relations," in *Not Now! Now!*, ed. Renate Lorenz (Berlin: Sternberg Press, forthcoming).

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

6 See Elizabeth Freeman, "Normal Work: Temporal Drag and the Question of Class," in *Temporal Drag*, ed. Pauline Boudry/ Renate Lorenz (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

7 See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Mathias Danbolt, *Touching History: Art, Performance and Politics in Queer Times* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2013).

8 See Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012).

9 Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster, and Renate Lorenz, *Reproduktionskonten fälschen!* (Berlin: b_books, 1999).

10 An informal group of dancers and choreographers who met for performances at the Judson Memorial Church in New York in the beginning of the 1960s. The group included people like Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Fred Herko, and Deborah Hay.

11 An informal group of dancers and choreographers who worked with improvisation and everyday material in New York in the beginning of the 1970s. The group included people like Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Dunn, and Trisha Brown.

12 In September 1991, right-wing Germans attacked Vietnamese street vendors and a residence of former contract workers in the German city of Hoyerswerda with stones and Molotov cocktails, while a mob of supportive people from the neighborhood cheered the perpetrators by shouting and applauding. In August 1992, the pogrom of Rostock-Lichtenhagen started as an attack on asylum seekers, and, after that, the violence focused on the dwelling next door, where 115 former contract workers and a television team were locked in. While the attacks by some hundred right-wing perpetrators went on over several days, they were applauded by up to two thousand onlookers. More attacks followed. In 1993 the German asylum law, which guaranteed the right to asylum as a basic right, was changed.

13 "Trap" was a project—exhibition and series of events—by Büro Bert (Renate Lorenz and Jochen Becker) and Stephan Geene, Kunstwerke Berlin, 1992. See *Copyshop: Kunstpraxis und politische Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Büro Bert (Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1993); "Game Girl" was an exhibition curated by Renate Lorenz at Shedhalle Zürich (1994) and Kunstverein München (1995). "NatureTM," also curated by Renate Lorenz in collaboration with Stephan Geene, took place at the Shedhalle Zürich (1995). On both projects see Büro Bert, minimal club, and Susanne Schultz, *geld.beat.synthetic. Copyshop 2: Abwerten biotechnologischer Annahmen* (Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1995).

14 Isabelle Alfonsi, invitation to "Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz: Journal Notes from Backstage" at Marcelle Alix, Paris, 2014.

15 See Ronald Tavel, "The Life of Juanita Castro: A One Act Play," www.ronaldtavel.com/documents/ the_life_of_juanita_castro.

16 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" (1986), *diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 25.

17 See Jean-Paul Sartre, preface "SPK—Turn Illness into a Weapon" (1987) in *SPK, aus der Krankheit eine Waffe machen*, ed. Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv (Heidelberg: KRRIM, 1993).

18 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 139.

19 Eva Meyer, "The Veil's Free Indirect Discourse about Itself," in *What Does The Veil Know?*, ed. Eva Meyer and Vivian Liska (Zürich: Edition Voldemeer, Springer, 2009), 174.

20 Eran Schaerf, *Eran Schaerf: Disorder of Appearance* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2013), 29.

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BERLIN AUGUST 2013



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